

Editorial

Selecting your editorial board: maintaining standards

With the ever-increasing use of digital technologies, rapid distribution of information and proliferation of open-access publications, it is important to reassess the role of editorial board members and their influence on the quality of articles entering the global pool of knowledge. Reviewing the criteria for good editorial board members is a useful exercise (Box 1).

Box 1. Essential criteria for editorial board members of scientific journals

Membership in science editors' association(s)
Good knowledge of research reporting guidelines
Previous reviewer and editorial contributions
Active involvement in research in a relevant field of science
Regular attendance of relevant conferences/seminars
Affiliation to a pro-active research group/university

Several learned associations have developed recommendations on editorial practices, with that of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) perhaps being the most comprehensive and up-to-date.¹ The COPE guidelines address almost all problems encountered in editorial practice – from inappropriate authorship, detection of scientific misconduct and transparent research reporting to technical support for editors, archiving of publications and good service to the readership. With over 6,000 members, COPE stands first amongst editorial associations, and adherence to the COPE recommendations by its members could be instrumental in unifying standards for and improving the quality of journals. In reality, editorial practices vary widely across journals, even amongst members of COPE and other associations advocating adherence to the best editorial practices. Papers with guest and ghost authorship, redundant, plagiarized, or unchecked information, full of conflicts of interest and obscure advertisements continue to sneak into academic journals, indexing databases and digital archives at an ever-increasing pace.²⁻⁴ Journals struggling to get indexed, archived and improve scientometric indicators sometimes embark on 'soft' peer review, opening the gates for substandard articles with a history of multiple rejections.⁵

The current exceptional opportunities for launching online journals and the digitization trends in most traditional journals expand publishing limits further, but at the cost of lowering the scientific threshold and ignoring the traditions of journal editing. Obviously, the limited pool of highly skilled authors, reviewers and editors is unable to satisfy the expanding publishing capacities. The experts prefer to focus on a handful of journals and to promote sources visible in the Web of Science database. The latter puts enormous pressure on editors of small and

newly launched journals,⁶ who have to make an extra effort to invite the best editorial team members, reviewers and authors, and promote published items by proper archiving and distribution to potential readers.^{1,7}

Editorial teams with up-to-date experts in science editing and publishing, and those actively advocating the interests of their journals, are the drivers of success in journal editing and indexing.⁸ Not surprisingly, even representatives of specialized professional journals tend to join editors' associations, to adhere to their recommendations, and to resolve editing and indexing problems through discussions with more experienced colleagues. As current research is becoming more complex, multi-disciplinary and international, greater emphasis is being placed on the research reporting skills of editorial team members and journal adherence to relevant reporting guidelines (eg CONSORT, PRISMA, STROBE).⁹

Most indexed journals have editorial experts on their Boards, who previously served as reviewers and/or authors in the same journal. It is highly likely that those who make quality contributions to a journal over a long time would care for the success of the journal. Similar to the best reviewer qualifications,¹⁰ it is favourable to have in the editorial team contributors with current involvement in research, relevant publications, and growing profiles on Scopus, Web of Science and other prestigious databases. Current expert opinion strongly supports the principle of "excellent editors - good authors".¹¹ There are plenty of examples of successful journals picking their editors and reviewers primarily from authors with solid publication records and research performance indicators, namely total citations and *h* index.¹² Some of these journals proudly show off the credentials of the editors on their websites and provide links to their profiles generated by bibliographic databases.

Previous editorial experience is another valuable asset for promotion to a new editorial post. When seeking a new editor or editorial team member, publishers often refer to their pool of reviewers and editors. It is hardly possible to run a journal where most of the editors are new to reviewing, editing and the publishing processes. Ideally, serving on editorial boards of several, non-competing journals with a diverse scope of interests would be beneficial to the editorial processes in each of these journals. However, there are certain limits which should be considered before recruiting 'busy' editors. Scholarly journals, as a source of original, validated and improving practice information, require day-to-day active work and contributions from editors. Such contributions include, but are not limited to, submission of publishable editorials and substantive articles, reviewer commentaries, promotion of the journal articles, soliciting articles, and attending editorial meetings.¹ Depending on tasks of each editorial post, some of these may suffer from accepting too many 'full-time' editorial invitations

at a time. In the case of holding crucial posts in journals with competing aims or similar scopes, the editor or editorial team member should publicly disclose competing interests. For decades, there has also been an increasing trend for inviting influential experts and big names to serve as editorial board members. This may lead to a situation where the experts accept honorary invitations, but fail to fully commit to the duties in all the journals.

One of the important functions of scholarly journals is conveying original information from diverse sources and distinguishing future directions of research. Journal editors and publishers alike can identify new directions of research of interest to their readership and improve standards of the journals by attending relevant international forums. The majority of science editors' associations offer regular conferences and seminars, which can be helpful for accruing editorial skills and expanding career prospects. Additional support comes from writing and editing courses tailored for specialists in other fields (eg clinicians) and arranged as part of specialized conferences.¹³

Attending conferences is an opportunity to expand your network, promote a journal, solicit papers from great authors, and meet potential editors. As journal promotion is becoming increasingly dependent on the number of quality submissions and citations from top journals, it is more likely that the best editorial candidates will be found amongst those from active research groups and universities. Again, parallels with best reviewers¹⁰ are appropriate here. Of the many benefits, researchers from top universities and affiliated centres may offer promotion by introducing the ethical writing standards of their primary institutions and by submitting publishable items, usually subject to archiving in institutional and open-access bibliographic repositories.

To sum up, scholarly journal editing is facing the great opportunities of digital technologies and the challenges posed by bibliometric competition. What was successful in the field only three–five years ago is no longer workable.

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"When seeking a new editor, publishers often refer to their pool of reviewers."